Ongekend 18e-eeuws Nederlands : taalvariatie in persoonlijke brieven

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Summary

Research on the history of eighteenth-century Dutch has shown that the contemporary written language was fairly standardized by the end of the eighteenth century. However, the research material in earlier studies consisted mostly of (printed) literary and official texts, written by the social and cultural elite, mostly men, in the main towns of the provinces of Holland and Utrecht. As hardly any written material was available produced by people who did not belong to the elite, the language use of the majority of the population of the Republiek der Zeven Verenigde Nederlanden (Republic of the Seven United Netherlands) has never been examined. How did the majority of the language users write (and speak)? Did their language use deviate from what we find in (printed) texts written by the elite? And are there any differences in language use between groups of people that correlate with their gender, social status or age? This dissertation aims to provide an answer to these questions by using a unique recently re-discovered source, namely private letters from the so-called *Sailing Letters* collection. This collection consists of documents that were captured by English privateers during times of warfare between England and the Dutch Republic in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The collection is currently preserved at the *National Archives* in Kew (London, UK).

The research of the present dissertation has been carried out within the larger *Letters as Loot* programme at Leiden University. This research programme, initiated and directed by Marijke van der Wal and funded by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO), aims to gain more insight into the sociolinguistic situation of Dutch in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. For this dissertation, 384 private letters from the period 1776-1784 were selected for the purpose of establishing an eighteenth-century sub-corpus of the *Letters as Loot* collection. The selected letters were written by both men and women, of various social ranks and of different ages. Apart from living in the Dutch Republic, the letter writers or addressees were stationed in the East for the Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (the VOC, the Dutch East India Company) or in the Caribbean for the West-Indische Compagnie (the WIC, the Dutch West India Company). People from various ranks were employed by these companies and since letter writing was the only way to stay in touch with their relatives and friends, letter writers from various ranks are represented in the corpus.

The *Letters as Loot* programme has a historical sociolinguistic focus, more in particular using an approach to language history described as operating 'from below'*,* in that it concentrates on the largely unknown

everyday language of ordinary people. Having already received some attention in earlier research, this approach firmly gained ground in Stephan Elspaß's seminal *Sprachgeschichte von unten* (2005). In this study, Elspaß examines everyday language use in letters written by German migrants in the United States during the early nineteenth century. He concludes that much language variation is to be found in the letters, especially in those written by less educated writers who also had fewer writing skills. Elspaß's study demonstrated that the German language was less standardized in the nineteenth century than had previously been assumed. In this approach to the subject, however, the term "from below" is used differently from the classical sociolinguistic studies by Labov (1994, 2001). When using the concepts 'language change from above' and 'language change from below', Labov refers to the level of consciousness of the language user. In the Labovian sense, a change from above means that less prestigious social groups (not necessarily people with a low socio-economic status) consciously adopt language features from a dominant social group. A change from below, on the other hand, occurs at an unconscious level. In the approach to language history 'from below' adopted in the present study, however, and following Elspaß (2005) the concepts from below and from above refer to the point of view from which language history is studied: either from below, that is from the perspective of ordinary people, or from above, which means from the perspective of the elite.

The eighteenth-century *Letters as Loot* corpus consists of written material since, for obvious reasons, no spoken material is available for this period of time. In this respect my research does not differ from earlier research on the history of Dutch. The lack of evidence of the spoken language does not mean, however, that we cannot get close to spoken language. Some written text types, such as a printed interview or a diary, are more closely related to the spoken than the written language, while for some spoken text types, such as a sermon, the reverse is the case. Koch & Oesterreicher (1985: 23) developed a model in which several text types are classified on a scale ranging from what they call 'Sprache der Nähe' 'language of immediacy' to 'Sprache der Distanz' 'language of distance'. On this scale private letters may be located somewhere in the middle since they show characteristics of both the written and the spoken language. We might consider private letters as a conversation taking place at a distance in which relatively everyday language is used, but private letters also contain features of more or less formal language use, such as formulaic language used in opening and closing formulas. Being aware of the hybridity of letters as a text type, I stress that especially the non-formulaic content of the private letters is most suitable for examining eighteenth-century everyday Dutch.

As a sociolinguistic analysis of language variation in private letters, my study focusses on various phonological, morphological and morpho-syntactic

features that are discussed in chapters 4 to 9. In these six chapters, eight different features are examined. The variation found and described is analysed mainly with the help of external factors such as gender and social class, though occasionally language internal factors are taken into account as well. The case studies are preceded by three general background chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the letters used in the corpus and also gives a description of the theoretical framework adopted. Much attention is paid to historical sociolinguistics and the language history from below approach. Chapter 2 gives an overview of the epistolary culture in The Netherlands during the late eighteenth century and discusses the educational system, the art of letter writing, everyday writing practice and elements of the normative tradition such as letter writing manuals. Chapter 3 focuses on the way the eighteenth-century *Letters as Loot* corpus was built, i.e. how the material was selected and how it was made fit for research. In this chapter the independent variables (gender, social class, age and region) are also introduced. Apart from the gender categories male and female, I distinguish four different social class categories (upper class, upper-middle class, lower-middle class and lower class) and three age groups, viz. young letter writers aged under 30, middle-aged letter writers aged 30-50 and the generation of writers older than 50. The variable region consists of nine groups, some of them corresponding with present-day provinces: the province of North-Holland (excluding Amsterdam), Amsterdam (the capital city of North-Holland), the province of South-Holland, the province of Zealand, the provinces of Utrecht and Gelderland, the four eastern provinces (Groningen, Friesland, Drenthe and Overijssel), the provinces of Brabant and Limburg, a group consisting of letter writers who were born and bred abroad and a group of letter writers whose origin is unknown.

Forms of address
The first feature that is analysed in this study, the use of forms of address in letter writing in the late eighteenth century, is discussed in chapter 4. In this chapter, I give an overview of all types of forms of address that are present in the corpus. Letter writers use two epistolary forms: *UE* (an abbreviation of *Uwe Edelheid* or *U Edele* 'Your Honour' and *UL* (an abbreviation of *Uwe liefde* 'Your beloved'). Furthermore, two other forms of address are frequently used in the corpus, namely *gij* and *u*. Finally, *j*-forms, such as *jij* and *je* are also found, which are said to have been more common in contemporary spoken language. My analysis has revealed some striking results, including the unexpected omnipresence of the epistolary form *UE* in the letters. Three quarters of the total number of forms of address are *UE* or a variant form and almost every letter writer appears to be familiar with this form of address. Lower-class writers use this form mainly in formulaic language, which

indicates that they may have learned the form by heart and did not use it spontaneously. Lower-class writers and the youngest generation of my informants use the forms *gij* and *u* more often than middle- and upper-class writers or the middle-aged and eldest of the writers, who all prefer *UE* instead.

Another striking outcome of the present study is that I have found hardly any gender differences in the use of forms of address: both men and women use the various forms attested in more or less the same way. This result differs from that of the seventeenth-century research of the *Letters as Loot* material, since Nobels (2013) did find gender differences in the use of forms of address. The gender similarity in my material might be the result of an increasing level of education – and thus increasing writing skills – of women by the end of the eighteenth century, at least as far as forms of address are concerned. Women from the late eighteenth century evidently knew which forms of address were commonly used in letter writing.

Thirdly, the present study clearly showed by whom the epistolary form *UL* and the *j*-forms were used. *UL* was the forerunner of *UE* and is extremely rare in the corpus. Only lower-class writers use this form. Apparently, by the end of the eighteenth century, *UE* had adopted the role that *UL* played earlier on in letter writing. The *j*-forms are also rare, which leads to the conclusion that letter writers judged these forms unfit for epistolary usage. The few tokens of the *j*-forms were mostly produced by letter writers that were born and bred abroad and were probably less familiar with the epistolary etiquette in the Dutch Republic.

Bipartite negation, reflexivity and reciprocity
Chapter 5 focuses on three features that have been topic of discussion in Dutch historical linguistics over the past years. The first is the use of bipartite negation in the letters. Secondly, I examined the ways in which reflexivity and reciprocity, two features that are closely related to each other, are expressed in the letters.

Bipartite negation was the regular form of negation in Middle Dutch. During this period in the history of Dutch negation thus mostly consisted of two elements: the negative particle *ne* or *en* preceding the finite verb combined with the negative adverb *niet* (or *geen*) as in *dat ik **niet en** weet hoe kort het met mij duren sal* 'that I do **not** [neg. part.] know how short my life will be'. The general assumption is that bipartite negation was rarely used in written language by the end of the eighteenth century. This was indeed shown to be true for the *Letters as Loot* material as well: in a sample of one hundred the letters, only 2% of the instances of negation were bipartite negations. At the same time, single negation was definitely not the standard for every letter writer in the corpus.

In present-day Standard Dutch the reflexive pronoun for the third person singular and plural is *zich(zelf)* ('himself'/'herself'/'itself'/ 'themselves'). The form *sich* (or *sick*) first made its appearance in Middle Dutch and in time gradually spread throughout the country. The older way of expressing reflexivity, by means of a personal pronoun (*haar* 'her' or 'them', *hem* 'him' and *hen/hun* 'them'), lost its share but never completely disappeared, for it is still present in regional speech today. How did this language change proceed? Was the spread of *sich* boosted by the elite or, the other way around, by the middle and lower classes? To answer these questions I examined the occurrence of all instances of the reflexive pronouns in the third person. *Sich* appeared to be dominant and the use of a personal pronoun as a reflexive was very rare in the letter corpus. Clearly, *sich* had taken over the position of the personal pronoun to express reflexivity by the end of the century. The eighteenth-century letter corpus, which dates from the latter half of the century, thus cannot give us any information on the actual spread of this language change that must have taken place in an earlier period.

The final topic of chapter 5 is reciprocity, and it presents the results of my analysis of the relationship between the newer form *elkander* ('each other') and the older variant *malkander* ('each other') in the eighteenth century. Which language users prefer the newer variant and which ones the older one? In the seventeenth century important writers such as Joost van den Vondel (1587-1679) changed from the older variant *malkander* to the newer *elkander*, on the basis of which linguists concluded that *elkander* must have been the preferred variant from the seventeenth century onwards (but see Nobels 2013 for the seventeenth century). My own research, however, shows that even in the late eighteenth century letter writers preferred *malkander* to *elkander*. The same conclusion could be drawn for eighteenth-century printed texts: until 1850s, *malkander* is far more frequent than *elkander*. The preference for *elkander* instead of *malkander* only becomes evident after that time, resulting *elkander* establishing itself as the dominant variant during the nineteenth century. Since in the letters of the corpus young male letter writers from the upper and upper- middle classes are the dominant users of *elkander*, we are probably dealing with a language change promoted by the upper (middle) classes here.

Schwa-apocope

In chapter 6, I discuss apocope of final schwa in verbal forms of the first person singular. In older stages of Dutch, we find a final schwa for the first person singular indicative in the present tense (as in *ik geeve* 'I give'), whereas this schwa is absent from many present-day varieties (as in *ik geef* 'I give'). Questions I address are the following: is the older variant with a schwa used by certain groups of letter writers and does the distribution of the older variant

correlate with certain regions in the Netherlands? Are there any differences in usage of the two variants (with or without a schwa) depending on the context in which the verb is used? And can any phonological influences be detected in the process of schwa-apocope?

My analysis has shown that apocope of final schwa was not completed yet by the end of the eighteenth century. The older schwa-like ending (for instance: *ik geeve* or *ik geeven* 'I give') is still present in the corpus and it occurs in a quarter of the instances. The newer variant with apocope of final schwa (*ik geef* 'I give') is the dominant form (75%). The variation detected correlates with region: letter writers from southern and eastern parts of the Dutch Republic make more use of the older variant with schwa than those from the northern and western parts of the country. In general, upper-class writers use the schwa more often than writers from the lower and middle classes. The change in which the schwa gradually disappeared was therefore probably initiated by the lower and middle classes. For the corpus as a whole there is no correlation with gender, but taking a closer look at three regions, Amsterdam, South-Holland and Zealand, I found gender variation in the regions South-Holland and Zealand, but not in Amsterdam. Women from the regions South-Holland and Zealand use strikingly more schwa-like endings and seem to be less aware of the upcoming new form without a schwa. The data for the male letter writers from the regions South-Holland and Zealand agree with that for male letter writers from Amsterdam where apocope of the schwa is advanced. Possibly, men from the regions South-Holland and Zealand adapted their language to the usage of writers from Amsterdam for professional reasons.

Furthermore, schwa apocope is less far advanced in the eighteenth-century material within formulaic language and also occurs less frequently when the personal pronoun *ick* 'I' is lacking from the sentence (ellipsis). This means that the older variant with schwa occurs more often in the formulaic parts of a letter. Phonological processes play a part as well in the dropping of the schwa as an analysis of preceding context of the final schwa bears out. When this context is a voiceless consonant, the schwa is more easily dropped than when the context is a voiced consonant. This can be related to the fact that for verb stems ending in a voiced consonant, dropping a schwa means that the voiced consonant will be at the end of a word. In Dutch voiced consonants are always devoiced in this position.

N-apocope

Chapter 7 deals with a related topic: apocope of final -*n*. This feature is well-known in modern spoken Dutch: as a typical orthographical phenomenon, final -*n* occurs in writing but is not always pronounced. The *Letters as Loot* material is in some respects closely related to spoken language, so apocope of

final *-n* was expected to be found in the letters. If it did occur, it would be interesting to find out which letter writers apply this apocope. Nowadays, in certain regions of the Netherlands deletion of final *-n* correlates with grammatical or phonological conditions. The question presented itself whether this was also the case for the eighteenth-century letter corpus.

In printed texts from the late eighteenth century final *-n* is nearly categorical. However, in my material a considerable amount of variation is found. From a language-internal perspective, two groups could be distinguished. In plural forms of finite verbs, infinitives and plural forms of nouns I found dropping of final *-n* in about 30% of the instances. In gerunds (infinitives preceded by *te* 'to'), past participles and words consisting of a single morpheme the *-n* was dropped in only 20% of the instances. Moreover, final *-n* was dropped twice as often by women compared to men. And the lower the social class of a letter writer, the more often he or she droppeds final *-n*. This variation can be related to the fact that men as well as the upper classes as a whole were still better educated than women and the lower classes, although the results of my analysis of forms of address (chapter 4) showed that men and women behaved rather similarly with respect to this feature. Apparently, for apocope of final *-n* the results are influenced by the fact that men had more writing experience and were more aware of language norms, such as the spelling rule that final *-n* should always be written down, whether or not it was pronounced. Apocope of final *-n* is especially typical for the region of Holland (North-Holland, Amsterdam and South-Holland). In other regions final *-n* was less easily dropped.

Diminutives

The eighteenth-century use of diminutive suffixes is the topic of chapter 8. In printed texts from the period the dominant suffix is *-je*, but instances of *-ie* can be found in printed texts when spoken language is represented. Since the language of private letters is closely related to spoken usage, it was expected that this *-ie*-suffix would occur more frequently in the *Letters as Loot* corpus than in printed texts. My analysis confirmed this expectation: both suffixes, *-je* and *-ie*, are indeed the two most frequent types in the eighteenth-century corpus. However, it proved difficult to determine the pronunciation of the suffix spelled *-ie*. The grapheme <j> was introduced no earlier than the beginning of the seventeenth century. Before that, the spelling <ie> was used for both [i] and [jə], which means that the suffix *-ie* might be interpreted as either [i] or [jə]. In the late eighteenth century, we still find traces of this old spelling practice, so I needed to exclude the possibility that *-ie* represented [jə]. To this end, I examined the habits of each individual letter writer who used an *-ie*-suffix in order to establish whether they also used the grapheme <j> in

their letters. If this was the case, it was deemed plausible that when they spelled the diminutive suffix as <ie> or <i> it was pronounced [i].

Since many letter writers who used the -*ie* suffix came from Amsterdam, I interpreted the results by setting off the region Amsterdam from the other regions my informants came from. For the corpus as a whole, it was found that women used the -*ie*-suffix more often than men and since this suffix is the variant that is not likely to occur in printed texts, my study shows that women seemed to be less aware of the status of the suffix as being less appropriate for the written medium. In Amsterdam, the usage of the diminutive suffix not only correlated with gender but with social class as well: the lower the social class of a letter writer, the more he or she was found to use the -*ie*-suffix. The same applies to age: the older a letter writer, the more instances of the -*ie*-suffix were attested.

The genitive

In the past, Dutch had a four-case system, but by the end of the Middle Ages this system had largely disappeared from the everyday language. However, during the process of language standardisation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a case system was considered indispensable to a proper language and cases were consequently more or less re-introduced into the written language, with Latin as an outstanding model. This development explains why the case system survived longer in written than in spoken Dutch. The question arose whether traces of this case system still occurred in the late-eighteenth-century *Letters as Loot* corpus. I looked at this matter from the viewpoint of one particular case, namely the genitive (e.g. *aen de zijde **der** jndianen* 'on the side of the indians'). Letter writers were able to express a relationship between a possessor and a possession by three means besides case. They could have used an -*s*-suffix (e.g. *ons lieffe dogter**s** verjardag* 'our sweet daughter's birthday'), or they could have used the preposition *van* 'of' (e.g. *twe honden **van** myn buren* 'two dogs of my neighbours'), while they also had the possibility of using a construction with *zijn* or *haar*, a possessive pronoun of the third person (e.g. *want het is dog kooplyden **haar** gelt* 'for it is yet merchants their money'/'for it is yet merchants' money').

The construction with the preposition *van* was found to be the most frequent variant in the corpus. The genitive occurs in a quarter of the instances and thus took a bigger share among the different variants than suspected, since the genitive was probably hardly ever used in spoken language. However, the instances of the genitive were mostly found in formulaic language, so that this construction may be said to be less typical of the spoken language of the time.

In non-formulaic contexts, the genitive was more often used by male letter writers and by letter writers from the upper classes. This can be explained by the higher level of education of men and members of the upper

classes in general. These informants had more access to written material in which the genitive was used quite often. Women and letters writers from the lower classes had less access to this material and consequently would have encountered the genitive less often. The construction with a possessive pronoun, like *zijn* (or *haar*), is very rarely found in the corpus and is only used in non-formulaic contexts. This construction is used more often by women, and more specifically by upper-middle-class women younger than 30 years, than by men. This is probably due to the fact that men were – due to the higher level of their education – more aware of the fact that this construction was stigmatized and should be avoided in written language.

General conclusions

In addition to providing a summary of the study conducted here, the final chapter presents the general conclusions found on the basis of my analysis of the eighteenth-century *Letters as Loot* corpus. The first of these is that most of the features dealt with in this study show a considerable degree of variation between groups of language users. This means that language use in the late eighteenth century was indeed more varied than previously assumed on the basis of printed texts. Secondly, I was able to identify some groups as frequent users of variants that are less likely to appear in printed material. Especially female letter writers use these variants far more often than male ones. I have also shown that lower- and lower-middle-class letters writers often behave in the same way as women. The most likely explanation for these similarities is the fact that both groups are less well educated and have less writing and reading experience than men and upper- and upper-middle-class writers. The results thus show gender and social differences in language use, and consequently confirm the importance of studying language history from below.

Finally, I investigated whether the *Letters as Loot* material would give an insight into the spoken language of the late eighteenth century and whether it is justified to assume that the language of these letters is closely related to spoken language. For certain features in the analysis, I have shown that the written language must indeed have been influenced by spoken usage. This was the case for the diminutive suffix: the *-ie*-suffix which was used quite often in these letters, while the suffix, which is often associated with spoken language, is hardly ever used in printed texts. The results from the examination of apocope of final *-n* in the letters also show traces of the spoken language for some letter writers. In their letters final *-n* had very likely disappeared due to the influence from their (possibly regional) spoken language. However, for certain features no influence from the spoken language could be identified, and it appeared that the language use in the letters was rather influenced by epistolary etiquette or conventions of the written language. This can be concluded from my analysis of forms of address: *j*-forms, commonly used in

the spoken language, are almost absent in the *Letters as Loot* corpus, whereas the epistolary form *UE* is omnipresent in the letters. The research material also comprises quite a few tokens of the genitive, a feature form the written language, while this case is said to have been hardly ever used in the spoken language. At the same time, it is clear from my study that a great deal of the occurrences of the genitive are found in the formulaic parts of the letters, which tend to preserve older stages of Dutch, as I have shown for some other features as well. The language of the formulaic parts of the letters also suggests evidence of a formal teaching process. On the whole, it must be concluded that the *Letters as Loot* material first represents written discourse. However, the material nevertheless reveals clear characteristics of the spoken language. For this reason, it seems plausible to consider these private letters as a mixture of written and spoken language.

By examining various linguistic features from a language history from below perspective, in this dissertation I have both tried to give an impression of the linguistic richness of the eighteenth-century *Letters as Loot* material and demonstrated the fruitfulness of the chosen approach. The results may inspire other scholars to continue studying eighteenth-century Dutch language variation and the diversity of language use that has become apparent in letters from the past.